

### Exploring the Mind of Walt Whitman

Walt Whitman is a man of uncanny talents. A connoisseur of words and spiritual philosopher, Whitman constructed some of America's finest literature. Perhaps the pinnacle of his career is found within the pages of Leaves of Grass, his most pronounced work. Within this masterpiece, one finds poems elevating the importance of the senses and the human mind and their role in society. No poem illustrates this more so than *Song of Myself*, a figurative journey through the subconscious in which the reader gets a feel for what Whitman really stands for. In his critically acclaimed *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman utilizes free verse and striking symbolism to address themes of equality, individualism and spirituality, reminiscent of the Transcendentalist ideology of Emerson and Thoreau.

Throughout Whitman's American epic, his iconic use of free verse allows the reader to fully understand the message he tries to get across. Instead of confining himself to such narrow parameters where the meaning could get lost, Whitman creates an atmosphere by abandoning common poetic forms of the past, creating a style that has stood the test of time. Initially, though, many critics despised his use of free verse and dismissed it as barbaric: "it is barbarous, undisciplined, like the poetry of a half-civilized people, and, as a whole, useless, save to those miners of thought who prefer the metal in its unworked state" ("Studies Among the Leaves: the Assembly of Extremes"). However, when one takes a look at Stanza 2 in Section 2, it is hard to agree with the above stance:

The atmosphere is not a perfume, it has no taste of the distillation, it is odorless,  
It is for my mouth forever, I am in love with it,  
I will go to the bank by the wood and become undisguised and naked,  
I am mad for it to be in contact with me.

Beautifully written, this excerpt gets at Whitman's transcendent philosophy by explaining how he longs for contact with the natural world. He describes how human souls are one with

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the atmosphere and should embrace this phenomenon. Had this verse been written in the style of Fireside Poets of the same time, the raw emotion Whitman put forth in describing his feelings could have been lost because due to the conventional style they practiced. Aside from Whitman's unique style used in *Song of Myself*, his remarkable use of symbolism throughout the poem amazes the reader throughout the duration of his "voyage" of self-discovery.

Whitman makes creative revelations with the use of various symbols within his work. In the first section Whitman states, "I celebrate myself, and sing myself, / And what I assume you shall assume / For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you" (Section 1). In this particular line, Whitman uses "I" quite literally. He is in fact talking about himself and also including the reader in this discussion. However, as the poem progresses, Whitman's "I" begins to take on a new role, one that represents the cosmos encompassing both the physical and spiritual world. Through his use of catalogs to "name a variety of professions and people", Whitman takes on the role as a universal being. Whitman "becomes part of these people and these people come to compose his own self" ("Leaves of Grass Analysis"). The central symbol of *Song of Myself* is grass, representative of democracy. Whitman suggests that an individual blade of grass contains distinct characteristics that set it apart from the other blades of grass. He continues this metaphor by insinuating that the blades of grass together are even more beautiful than each individual blade. Additionally, the grass represents the cycle of death, as expressed toward the beginning of the poem:

They are alive and well somewhere,

The smallest sprout shows there is really no death,

And if ever there was it led forward life, and does not wait at the end to arrest it,

And ceas'd the moment life appear'd.

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All goes onward and outward, nothing collapses,

And to die is different from what any one supposed, and luckier (Section 6).

Here, “grass is symbolic of the ongoing cycle of life present in nature, which assures each man of his immortality” (Akash). Whitman’s extensive use of unconventional style and informative symbols contribute toward the central messages of the poem.

Walt Whitman’s themes of nature and transcending reality are similar to those preached by Ralph Waldo Emerson and Henry David Thoreau. In Section 11, Whitman pays homage to the “transparent eyeball” when he proclaims, “Dancing and laughing along the beach came the twenty-ninth bather, / The rest did not see her, but she saw them and loved them”. In this particular section, he describes a female looking onto a group of males. She joins their group, interacting with them without them knowing or realizing she is even there. Whitman allows the reader to tap into this concept by describing how humanity should interact with the world around them while also becoming an active observer. Another theme explored in *Song of Myself* is one of equality and individuality. Sections 8 and 33 showcase these themes in a simple manner, through Whitman’s use of catalogs and lists. In these sections, Whitman lists different careers and types of people he encounters on the journey that he describes. Whitman “identifies himself with every person, dead or living, and relates his involvement with the various phases of American history” (“Leaves of Grass Analysis”). He compares the President to a slave to a prostitute to a child; these comparisons point out that all beings are equals and should be treated as such, all the way through the last line of the poem.

*Song of Myself* takes the reader on a path of transcendence and discovery, one that offers a life-altering perspective on the world. Not only does it allow people to reevaluate their lives, but it lets people see both the good and the bad that humanity has to offer. It is easy to see why this particular poem has left such an impact on the whole of humanity.

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Whitman offers intellectual social commentary and his belief system, leaving the reader to decide what to take from his ideological viewpoint. In the end, Whitman leaves the reader with a clear sense of who he is and asks them to take this journey to figure out their place in society.

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